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Desire under conflict: The potential for queer in Hoda Barakat's *The Stone of Laughter*

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This article examines Hoda Barakat's original rendition of gender and sexual otherness in *The Stone of Laughter*, first published in 1990 -- the first Arabic novel with a queer protagonist, Khalil. The analysis sheds light on pre-modern Arabic literature's celebratory depiction of homoerotic desire vis-à-vis the dearth and negative connotations of the theme in modern Arabic fiction. The article explores Barakat's implementation of surrealism in her portrayal of Khalil's sexuality and the reality of his choices within the context of the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990). Khalil's queer identity, which marks his dissidence, becomes a form of resistance that challenges the status quo of his hetero-patriarchal society and the unresolved socio-political issues that led to the War.

Keywords: Queer identity; sexuality; gender; modern Arabic fiction; the Lebanese Civil War; *The Stone of Laughter*

Arabic literature and sexuality

Portrayals of homoerotic desire in Arabic literature are not a novelty; they date back to the 8th century, which saw the emergence of *adab al-zhurafah* (wittiness/entertainment literature) in the Abbasid Period (750–1258), a truly “golden age” of Arab-Islamic civilisation (Al-Samman 2008, 274). The poetic subgenre of *ghazal al-mudhakkar* (male-love poetry), a lyrical rendition of the theme, proliferated at the time and was refined and mastered by the Abbasid poet, Abu Nuwas (756–814), whose name became (in)famously synonymous with the tradition. Literary portrayals of same-sex love continued across the centuries and enjoyed popularity among Arab literati, religious imams and high-ranking officials. Pre-modern Arabic literature boasted a sophisticated lexicon to categorize, describe and celebrate homoerotic desire in various genres. From the *khamiryat* (wine poetry) of Abu Nuwas to al-

Jahiz's (d. 868–69) modern-style prosaic debate, *Mufakharat al-Jawari wa-al-Ghilman* [The boastings of slave girls and slave boys], in which he compared the sexual favours of male and female slaves, the tradition flourished; remarkable examples include al-Tifashi's (d. 1253) treatise, *Fi Nawader Akhbar al-Latah wa-MilhAsh'rihim* [The most unusual facts about homosexuals and the most entertaining poems written by them], where he changed the names of high-ranking officials to "protect their reputation", and the *maqamat* of Badi' al-Zaman al-Hamadani (d. 1324) among others (Al-Samman 2008, 271–276). The popular theme continued well into the fin de siècle.¹

Contrary to the liberal, permissive attitude of pre-modern Arab culture that acknowledged the fluidity of desire and sanctioned its artistic celebration in literature, modern literary depictions of homosexuality have been far less common and often problematic, despite the recent increase in the number of works dealing with the topic (al-Samman 2008, 270–271). Hanadi al-Samman (2008) and Kifah Hanna (2016) present a thorough overview of postcolonial Arabic fiction's depiction of homosexuality and show how queer characters did not appear on the modern literary scene until Naguib Mahfouz's mid-century novel, *Midaq Alley* appeared in 1947. Other sporadic representations followed between the 1970s and 2000s.²

None of these works, however, presented a homosexual character as the main protagonist, nor were they interested in analysing same-sex desire as a form of love. Instead, homosexuality had been presented as a "perversion" and a "social deviance", often linked to wider political and socio-economic issues (Hanna 2016, 102–103). In Al-Samman's words, modern portrayals of male homosexuality "draw on power dialectics of master/slave, active/passive and local/colonial, and as such reflect a sense of overall powerlessness, inferiority and alienation from the political process, while underscoring the Arab male's loss of manhood and of self" (2008, 270). Broadly speaking, these representations fall into two

categories: the first associates same-sex desire with current social injustices, legacies of colonial exploitation as well as postcolonial failures and corruption in the Arab world; Ghada al-Samman's ([1974] 1995) *Beirut '75* and Alaa al-Ansari's ([2000] 2011) *The Yacoubian Building* showcase instances of this category of fiction (Al-Samman 2008, 277). The second, more recent, trend underscores a significant development, where "one can find sympathetically rendered characters portraying true humane emotions that focus on the essence of same-sex relations and the individual's biological difference from heterosexuals" (Al-Samman 2008, 277). Hoda Barakat's *Hajar al-Dahhek*, ([1990] 1998; The stone of laughter) and Ilham Mansour's 2000 *Ana Heya Anti* (I am you) are good examples of this more nuanced view on homoerotic desire.

In this article, I analyse Barakat's *The Stone of Laughter*,³ the first Arabic novel with a queer, androgynous protagonist, Khalil. Set against the backdrop of the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990), this surrealist novel explores Khalil's dreams and fantasies vis-à-vis the reality of his choices in wartime Lebanon, which descended into a violent ethno-sectarian conflict aggravated by regional and international interventions.⁴ Barakat's text, which won the prestigious *al-Naqid* (The Critic) Award for debut novels, breaks away from the antagonistic approach that characterizes much of 20th-century Arabic literature's attitude towards homosexuality. Providing one of the best fictionalized narratives of social relations and collective trauma during the War, it weaves its protagonist's psycho-sexual struggles into Lebanon's wider conflict. Rather than casting homosexuality as a sign of moral decay, the text turns that cliché on its head by shifting the blame on to society's irrational problematization of sexual otherness, linking it to wider unresolved socio-political issues, many of which are caused and sustained by overarching hetero-patriarchal power structures. The originality of Barakat's approach stems from her adaptation of surrealism in her attempt to offer a neutral, objective depiction of Khalil's gender and sexual identity on the one hand,

and to highlight the “irrationality” of the protagonist’s societal norms, on the other. Kifah Hanna (2016) praises the avant-garde manipulation of surrealist aesthetics in Barakat’s Civil War novel series, commenting that much like the European surrealists in the 1920s and 1930s, Barakat touches upon a controversial topic -- sexuality -- in order to challenge cultural normative attitudes (101).⁵ The surrealist movement aimed to subvert bourgeois, patriarchal, hetero-normative social values by depicting rebellious figures and relying on femaleness and accounts of “madness” and “irrationality” in order to displace the male monopoly over what constituted rationality. Surrealism lends itself to transgression and is therefore political and politicized:

Barakat’s avant-garde appropriation of surrealism is central here, as this aesthetic mode is uniquely equipped for the transgression of traditional representations of both the masculine and the feminine. It opens for her an imaginative space between male and female, dream and reality, desire and constraint wherein, mediated by the limit-experience of war, the poles of socially enforced binaries are shown to intersect and fold into one another. (Hanna 2016, 97)

Importantly, Barakat reconfigures the significance of gender. Rather than depicting the “feminine as a site for madness, irrationality and hysteria”, she focuses on “male madness”, which comes to signify the fragmentation of society at large under the “pressures of the Civil War”. The fragmented masculine subject bears the impact of the national crisis as both the “cause and the product” of the conflict (107).⁶

The War itself is presented as the culmination of brutal intra-male struggle over power: male violence, universally inflicted, is the common cause and effect unifying the various warring parties despite their different ideological agendas. As an omnipresent

patriarchal enterprise, the War becomes a looming character in the novel with an overarching and devastating impact on society: raging parties and decadent soirées organized by powerful warlords take place against the backdrop of heavy bombardments, mass killings and endless destruction. Only Khalil appears to be aware of the absurdity of the War, an insight which endows him with a unique sense of sanity in a sea of complacency, complicity, helplessness or victimhood. All the other characters are united in their acceptance of the status quo and the role assigned to them by the hetero-patriarchal order. Regardless of their gender, class or position (as victim or victimizer), they are united in their conformity.

Much like Barakat herself, Khalil is a dissident; unlike many female authors of her generation, Barakat was not particularly concerned with women's issues: "Because I am an Arab woman and writer, I believe I should apologise, for despite the urgency of the problem, it is not among the concerns of my writings" (quoted in Aghacy 1998, 185). Instead, Barakat focuses on disrupting binary gender normativity by creating an androgynous character in Khalil, whose political neutrality is mirrored by his non-binary self-fashioning. Khalil positions himself "on the line between the masculine and the feminine worlds and [traverses] repeatedly from one to the other" in his endeavour to break the normative masculinity ascribed to him by his patriarchal society (Aghacy 1998, 186). His queer gender and sexual identity positions him outside the conflict, which he refuses to join in an act of defiance as he rejects the "either/or" gender and political identification of the other characters and embraces the "both/all" instead. Yet Khalil is not able to sustain his neutrality; he metamorphoses into a violent heterosexual man in the last scene, putting an end to his peaceful resistance. Barakat's creation and eventual destruction of a realistic, gentle homosexual protagonist sheds light on the author's projections of the (im)possibilities of having and maintaining a queer identity within the particular context of the War. Khalil's moral idealism, which is intrinsically linked to his non-normative sexual and gender identity, is offset by his unexpected radical

transformation at the end, which spells his metaphorical death and illustrates the rotten state of affairs in postcolonial Lebanese society, whose intolerance of the pacifist hero is indicative of more profound unresolved issues. Khalil's sexual and gender dissidence is not a sign of moral corruption; it is a powerful declaration of his peaceful resistance to and defiance of the hegemonic hetero-patriarchal order.

Conflict through the eyes of the queer beholder

Unlike other young men, Khalil prefers to stay in his room, which is kept immaculately clean and tidy in contrast to the chaos of the outside world of the raging War. He is effeminate, with delicate limbs, and does not fit in with the macho male culture of the War. He keeps away from militias and secretly falls in love with a couple of young men: his friend, Naji, who lives in the elegant apartment upstairs with his mother Mme Isabelle, and, later, his cousin Youssef. The reader is encouraged to identify with Khalil, through whose eyes much of the chaos of the War unfolds. The narrative alternates between Khalil's voice and that of the omnipresent, omniscient unnamed narrator, who reveals her occupational and gender identity as a "woman who writes" (Barakat [1990] 1998, 248) in the final page. The two voices intermingle confusingly at times as they cover a range of themes and topics in war-torn Lebanon. These include: sectarian tensions; international and regional intervention; the War's impact on people's psyche and behaviour; petty feuds between neighbours; gender relations. The novel also highlights political corruption and the big money to be made through the trade in war, as well as the commercialization of death by national and international journalists, who cash in on images of destruction. The fetishization of violence is a theme that runs throughout the text and unites everyone (but Khalil), regardless of their class, status or gender.

By contrast, Khalil is a quiet person who avoids mingling with people, preferring the solitude of his room as his sanctuary:

Each time the war makes itself felt, Khalil's need for order and cleanliness grows more urgent; it becomes more like an obsession. When the raging battles are over, Khalil's room returns into a "brand-new" condition of cleanliness and freshness.

(Barakat [1990] 1998, 14)

Khalil's disposition is stereotypically aligned with the female domestic sphere. The narrator likens his obsession with the cleanliness of his room to that of a "housewife", or an "old, fair-skinned spinster" (14). Khalil frequently fancies himself a woman: he imagines being a depressed "plump divorcee" as he awaits Naji's visits, creating a sentimental scenario in which he is a loving, faithful woman in a heterosexual relationship with Naji (27); in another cross-gender fantasy, Khalil dreams of "the day that Youssef would come to ask for my hand. He'd be dressed in his best and I would blush, hesitate before I nod in agreement", becoming his "wife of the wrong gender" (138).

Barakat's fiction "focuses on male characters whose sense of male identity is threatened" (Aghacy 1998, 185), yet her portrayal of gender goes beyond the simple binary juxtaposition of male and female identities in favour of the androgyne: the neither and the both. This stance corresponds with how she regards herself as an author; she declares: "I would like to be both man and woman in my writing" (quoted in Aghacy 1998, 192). Khalil's non-normative gender identity, with which he has a complicated relationship that vacillates between acceptance and rejection, is a recurrent theme. Khalil is portrayed as possessing typically feminine features: he has "big eyes", soft child-like "honey-coloured hair", a petite underdeveloped figure and "narrow shoulders that are no wider than his little pillow" making his body more like "a teenager's than a man's" (Barakat [1990] 1998, 16). Presented as a

social misfit, Khalil does not belong to either of the two groups of men in his war-torn country: those younger than him, who matured quickly and end up running local affairs and dreaming about going abroad, or those his own age, for they, unlike him, control the things that matter, such as politics, leadership and journalism (17). The narrator comments that:

both branches of manhood closed their gates on Khalil and left him out on his own in a narrow pathway that is in close contact with two extremely polarized spaces: a submissive, stagnant vegetative femininity, on the one hand, and active, explosive, volcano-like types of manliness, on the other. (17)

The very characteristics that signify his gender indeterminacy appear to be intrinsically linked to his gentle demeanour and higher sense of morality vis-à-vis everyone else's indulgence, helplessness or indifference. Khalil's androgyny is thus inextricably linked to his non-conformism, dissidence and rejection of the status quo of his corrupt society.

From the beginning of the book, Khalil is very much aware of his gender and sexual difference. We catch glimpses of his stream of consciousness as he daydreams about his secret lovers and the homoerotic tension he secretly feels in their presence: he admires Naji's "jet-black hair", his "effortless sense of chic" and is aware of his every move, such as the way he shifts his leg allowing the "little hairs" stuck in his sock line to move further down in their "natural position" (Barakat [1990] 1998, 8). Khalil is aware of his own incompatibility with the macho, masculine culture of the War: once, as he went out shopping,

an armed youth got out of Flippers [a shop] and sarcastically eyed a pale Khalil and his handbag, which was more like the sort owned by housewives. Khalil carried his

bag and kept walking with steady footsteps as though to respond to the youth's looks.

(39)

In another incident, the narrator captures Khalil's embarrassment as Nayef, spending the night at Khalil's, sits in a chair smoking and chatting wearing nothing but his underwear, a pose which creates a sense of homoerotic tension for Khalil (57–62). The scene highlights the stark difference between Nayef's self-assured masculinity and Khalil's anxiety over his sexual and gender identity.

Khalil's queerness acquires political significance as the narrator unpacks the binary spheres of societal gender relations, arguing that men's public work has a wider destructive impact. Women, may "chatter" and "chat" about "trivial matters", yet they are the real doers who keep everything running without causing wars and disasters: "women ... these blessed beings do not speak ... they chant and sing ... They do not make sentences with ideas, for they do not seek to make history when they speak. Canons do not bombard; ideas do" (Barakat [1990] 1998, 117–118). Only men, however, are deemed to "understand politics" (120) and are thus "fitted" to be involved in them. Khalil, on the other hand, occupies a neutral sphere metaphorically, biologically and intellectually. Excluded from the heteronormative gender binary, he is a critical vehicle to convey its flaws to the reader. An intelligent young man from a working-class background, Khalil did well at University before moving to the capital; he is headhunted by the Newspaper men (pseudo-journalists and warlords), who want to use his literary talents for their own political purposes (121). His first assignment is to write an analytical commentary on an attack involving one of the warring militias and Israel. Khalil makes an intellectually sound argument that proves incomprehensible to the Newspaper bosses, highlighting the ideological – not just bio-sexual – divide between Khalil and the other characters (141–142).

Khalil's androgyny is a source of enlightenment that exposes the hegemony of heteropatriarchy. The argument is cleverly woven into the narrative through Barakat's functional implementation of surrealism, which is morphologically and semantically integrated in the figurative language of the Arabic text, as Barakat blurs the boundary between the animate and the inanimate. Khalil reveals a metaphorical truth about the War as he reflects on the morphological similarities of the words *bahr* (بحر) and *harb* (حرب), ("sea" and "war" respectively). The assonant words form a symbolic anagram, where the rhetorical shift in the /b/ and the /h/ blurs their meanings and exposes their tragic similarity: the infinite scale and the monotonous repetitive cycle of what they signify. The War becomes as endless as the movement of the sea; both go on perpetually. The unlikely similarity between the two is revealed when Khalil, due to a shortage, considers reusing the water with which he has washed his vegetables; he ponders this simple act:

The Sea, all of it, goes back to the Sea ... All these days that wash the City go to the Sea ... This includes what the War has done, destroyed, burnt and mutilated for so many years ... To the Sea ... The War (*al-harb*) to the Sea (*al-bahr*) ... These mutating letters finding themselves between that which was land and that which referenced water ... And he saw the Sea clearly: it was full and overflowing with the City's belongings and limbs. The Sea then returns it all back to us in the shape of vapour and rain, which we use for cleaning and irrigation ... Startled, Khalil looked at his vegetables, shiny with the grease from the City and threw them all into the bin. (Barakat [1990] 1998, 40–41)

Khalil recognizes the bigger picture and realizes his society's metaphorical and literal entrapment in the omnipresent War. The Sea (*al-bahr*) itself, a metaphor for liberation and infinite space, becomes as repressive and restrictive as the War (*al-harb*). Barakat herself is

sensitive to the porous rapport between the animate and the inanimate, thanks to 15 years of War that welded human beings into the very texture of their city, and became an extension of people's limbs, dreams and nightmares (quoted in Aghacy 1998, 191–192). Similarly, Khalil senses the inescapable interconnectedness of all that is entrapped in the War.

Relevant to this is the remarkable personification of inanimate objects, spirits and concepts, which become secondary characters with symbolic roles that draw on the rigid masculine/feminine binary gender constructions of nouns and adjectives in the Arabic language. Death (*al-mawt*, a masculine noun) is presented as a “man”, an architect sitting at his desk and wiping his glasses in preparation for his work in the City (*al-madeena*, a feminine noun) in the wake of a heavy shelling (Barakat [1990] 1998, 162–163). *Al-mawt* is in charge of *al-madeena*, who appears to be “heady” in the “festive” atmosphere of “happy bombardment” – the City’s “only glue, which collects its multiple small shrapnel, like a magnet to iron powder.” (162). “Death”, the narrator continues,

is the City’s only male; when she indulges in her playful whims, he twists her arm and brings her closer to him calming her down and restoring the regularity of her breathing. He provides her with her real taste, which she seems to forget as the bombardment increases; he is the City’s father (162)

The power dichotomy in Barakat’s gendered personifications reflects the patriarchal nature of the conflict.

The men martyred in the shelling appear to go through a process of gender reassignment; Khalil observes how a dead youth – a “he” – becomes a “she”:

the corpse [*juttha*, a feminine noun] does not look quite like the person she belonged to when that person was still alive [...] women would [...] examine the eyes once again

because the corpse does not look quite like the living person she once belonged to; this creates a streak of doubt for the mourners, who stop referring to the deceased with their name ... they do not utter their name – they say “*al-juttha*” instead ... so much so that the feminine third-person pronoun is now used to refer to a dead man ... they say “she” arrived, “she” was buried, “she” was raised. (Barakat [1990] 1998, 67)

Khalil’s awareness of the supernatural realm of the emasculated dead and their tormented souls corresponds with his own gender and sexual limbo; like them, he is virtually dead in terms of the way “men” are meant to act in his society. The hypersensitive queer protagonist operates in a different dimension: he is aware of fellow creatures (dogs, rats and insects) as well as spirits and even inanimate objects and spaces; he signals his disengagement from societal norms through withdrawal into his personal sphere, which does not discriminate between the animate and the inanimate. Khalil’s vacillation between the real and the surreal is not just a stylistic feature of Barakat’s surrealist narrative. It is symbolic, and indicates his absolute rejection of the binary and utmost embrace of the inclusive, hence the wider metaphorical significance of his androgyny.

Khalil blames his “difference” -- in terms of his gender, sexuality, and political neutrality -- on the “psychological impact” of the War. Yet we learn that he has always been “different” since childhood, before the War. He recalls his mother joking about how she would protect him in case of a foreign army invasion: “they only kill men and I would tell their commander that you are one of my little girls and he would believe me when he sees you” (Barakat [1990] 1998, 132–133). Khalil’s secret indulgence in queer fantasies suggests that, privately, he accepts who he is. Increasingly, he becomes aware of the impossibility of reconciling his queer identity with society’s disapproval of it. He soon learns that in order to survive the War, he has to become a “man”, and that as long as he remains closeted, “he” is regarded as a “she” – a *juttha* whose soul is trapped in the limbo of the War. Even his

attainment of sexual gratification is confined to the psychic realm, in line with his spirit-like existence; his homosexual desires never materialize physically. The only time he engages in a sexual act with someone else is when, at the end of the novel, he rapes his vulnerable tenant, a single mother, at which point, Khalil is no longer the special queer protagonist of the text. The new anti-hero that emerges in the final passage is a macho arms-dealer and a rapist -- the very antithesis of the sensitive androgyne.

Sexuality: from the metaphysical to the physical

Khalil's transformation is radical; however, it is carefully signposted by key events and by his gradual shift from the realm of the metaphysical to that of the material. Exploring his sexuality initially only in dreams and fantasies that act as Freudian psychical outlets for his intimate desires, Khalil appears to be mainly living in his own personal world, or what Sigmund Freud ([1900] 2001) refers to as "psychical reality": the private sphere of one's thoughts, dreams, fears and fantasies, which contrasts with the "material reality" of our shared physical world, in which we interact with other individuals. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud famously contends that dreams fulfil otherwise forbidden or impossible wishes. Khalil's special connection to the psychic realm best manifests itself in a classic Freudian dream he has shortly after Naji's death, whereby he realizes his desires: to be a woman and to consummate his love for Naji.

After Naji's death, Khalil enters his room and inspects his belongings; he finds a couple of photographs: one of which is of a younger, long-haired Naji happily posing together with a girl at the Beirut Corniche; the girl has a neutral expression with her eyes fixed on the onlooker. Khalil finds the girl's defiant look mesmerizing in a scene that is reminiscent of Eve Sedgwick's (1985) theory of "erotic triangles" (21–27), whereby the bond between two rivals (generally men in the European tradition) over a beloved (usually a

woman) is as intense and powerful as the love bond between the competing lover and the beloved (21). The girl in the photo becomes a catalyst for Khalil's articulation of his desire: he comes out to her image and tells her about his sexual fantasies, past and present:

I feel like telling you many things ... I find this familiarity between us rather confusing. I mean I've never fancied a woman and I've never seen a doctor about it ... occasionally, I would think of Mme Isabelle's body, the details of that body under her clothes and I would have a desire to embrace her passionately; however, my 'member' has no connection with this ... Women in general evoke a quiet curiosity in me that turns into a fear as I get close to their bodies [...] But you, I fancy your legs strongly and I'd like to caress them with my hand starting from your ankle and going up slowly, very slowly. (Barakat [1990] 1998, 75–76)

Khalil can only articulate his sexuality in the realm of the psychical (dreams, visions and fantasies); addressing the girl in the photograph falls under the same principle. Just as he confines himself to his room, Khalil confines his sexuality to his psyche. His private exploration of his desire reveals a more complex image: Khalil is not simply gay or homosexual, but bisexual: queer in the absolute sense, for he entertains erotic feelings towards the girl in the picture, which are replicated in his earlier enchantment with a blonde girl in the village and his later reaction to his cousin Zahra's interest in him. Khalil comes out as queer; importantly, however, none of these non-heteronormative aspects of his sexual and gender identity ever materialize. They remain largely abstract, securely confined to his private psychical reality, which is revealed to the reader by the voyeuristic narrator.

Relevant to this is Khalil's obsession with a nightly radio show, where listeners phone in to discuss their love lives and request romantic songs. Khalil's attachment to the show replaces his need to interact with the physical world outside. He develops a subconscious

attraction to a male caller, Ra'fat, who has a debate about women's fidelity with a female caller, Mervat, in reference to the real-life Egyptian-Scottish cinema star, Mervat Amin. Khalil falls asleep and has a highly symbolic dream in which he becomes a beautiful woman with "shiny chestnut hair" and long legs; he combines features from Mervat Amin and the girl in the picture in Naji's room. He is laughing coquettishly with Ra'fat:

Khalil looked at his legs shyly and saw the legs of the girl in the photograph with Naji; he felt suddenly reassured of his beauty and ability to love. Ra'fat got close to Khalil's neck; his lips and eyes were getting closer to Khalil's face, whose head suddenly hit the tree behind him violently. Khalil felt his face sensing the fiery slap only to see a red-eyed Naji, looking terrifyingly angry [...]. Khalil was trembling severely, but not of fear. Khalil took hold of Naji's collar and pulled at it causing his shirt to break showing his bare stomach as there were no buttons to resist his tug. Naji stepped back, wiped his hair with his hand, got close to Khalil slowly extending a strong hand towards the latter's leather belt undoing it. (Barakat [1990] 1998, 83–85)

Khalil then wakes up:

Every orifice in his body was oozing with its special water until it was all depleted [...] his pyjama trousers were stuck to his inner thighs [...] Only his eyes were very dry, so he sat on his bed and started weeping loudly shedding a river of tears until the sun flooded his room completely. (Barakat [1990] 1998, 83–85)

Khalil's sexual dream is a realization of his potential happiness, revealed to him when he is transformed into a woman, who is in fact based on two, with two matching suitors, Ra'fat and Naji, his true love who appears to be jealous of Ra'fat's advances. Suddenly, Ra'fat is out of the picture and Khalil and Naji are able to consummate their love enabling Khalil to reach a real-life orgasm in his sleep. However, reality hits him violently as he wakes up, only to

realize the intensity of the psychical fulfilment of his desire is matched by the impossibility of its materialization in real life. Social attitudes aside, his beloved, Naji, has been shot dead - hence Khalil's hysterical reaction upon awakening and realizing the impossibility of what he has just experienced in his sleep. The scene is a classic Freudian dream; Khalil's wish can only be fulfilled psychically through a dream that reveals to him in graphic detail what he wants and cannot have: to be openly feminine or a woman in a relationship with his dead friend/lover, Naji. Both wishes are unattainable, hence the dramatic catharsis upon awakening. The dream represents Khalil's coming-out to himself forcefully and unabashedly: his painful acknowledgement of his misery.

The scene also further complicates the aforementioned referencing of Sedgwick's "erotic triangles" in relation to the girl in the photo. Drawing on Gayle Rubin's work, Sedgwick shows how the rivalry for a partnership with the (female) beloved is essentially a homosocial partnership between men who use women as "exchangeable, perhaps symbolic, property for the primary purpose of cementing the bond of men with men" (Sedgwick 1985, 25–26). Khalil's complex assumption of the role of the "compound woman" in the dream, which creates rivalry between "her" two potential "suitors", Ra'fat and Naji, falls into this narrative (an erotic triangle), in which Khalil assumes control over his gender identity and uses it to seduce Naji. The homosexual element of Khalil's attraction to Naji is suppressed and overshadowed by the elaborate dreamwork's manipulation of Khalil's gender identity, which ensured that the sexual fulfilment of this love remained in line with society's heteronormative standards: Khalil consummated his love as a woman – rather than as the androgyne he is.

This anti-climactic scene – a dream-turned-nightmare – is a key event in the novel: it highlights to Khalil the impossibility of what he wants and sets in motion his transformation. His shadowy androgynous existence and closeted homosexual desires would need to be re-

examined, re-calibrated and fine-tuned if he were to stand a chance and rise from his virtual death-in-life existence, which, is not dissimilar to that of the emasculated corpses of the martyrs. Khalil's radical transformation at the end becomes a metaphorical act of gender reassignment that is paradoxically at odds with that of the emasculated dead men: not only does it modify the process (by turning an androgyne into a "man"), but it is also largely self-inflicted (unlike death, which is imposed from without); Khalil seeks it and justifies it as a survival mechanism.

A number of events lead up to this dramatic change: the first is Khalil's secret infatuation with his handsome younger cousin, Youssef, which is further complicated by attraction felt by Zahra -- Youssef's sister -- to Khalil. This unrequited love triangle flatters Khalil temporarily and reassures him of his worth: "Khalil was pleased with Zahra's love for him [...] he liked the fact that she loved him" (Barakat [1990] 1998, 94); he would even fantasize about what she must have thought of doing with him privately and entertained the idea of being intimate with her (94–95). However, Khalil soon realizes that he is madly in love with Youssef: "Oh my God ... I'm fatally in love" (100). Khalil's inability to fulfil his secret love for Youssef turns into a misogynistic resentment towards Zahra; he suddenly becomes hypersensitive to

the odious smell coming out of her armpits, her huge legs, red hands and thick skin could not possibly belong to a creature with a soul. He sees her as a rotten fish with a thick film covering her withering eyes, fretting only to emit more hideous odours.
(100)

Khalil's misogynistic dehumanization of Zahra is indicative of his gradual integration into the hetero-patriarchal system as he starts mixing with politics (120–121). The urge to conform to heteronormative masculinity and the physical and psychological changes that accompany the

process is a theme that runs throughout the novel. Youssef feels compelled to step into the shoes of his father -- who has left for the Gulf -- and become the “breadwinner”. Youssef begins to change: the youth feels the need to turn into a “man”: “I’ve now become a man and I cannot ignore the situation anymore, said Youssef to Khalil” (127); even his greeting becomes “manlier” (127). We learn how Nayef, who used to be shy and gentle, has also gone through the process and ended up securing an important position at the Newspaper; his handshake has now become “all very manly” (62–65). Joining the shady, masculine world of warlords is presented as a pragmatic necessity; it bestows material benefits on young men whose options are limited by the conflict. However, the process results in a drastic personality transformation and can be fatal, as is the case with young Youssef, who is soon murdered in cross-militia violence.

Khalil mourns Youssef’s death quietly while envying women’s ability to mourn publicly and collectively:

Only then when Khalil’s latent desire is about to ripen, his lovers are killed ... their bodies are stolen and he is left without the ability to cry and mourn publicly, deprived from the gift of being able to bury them, which reminds him that he is not man enough to be their equal, nor a woman to be believed. (Barakat [1990] 1998, 157)

Youssef’s tragic death is another reminder to Khalil of the impossibility of his situation – he cannot keep falling in love with men only for them to be claimed by the War. Youssef’s death becomes another catalyst for Khalil to metamorphose and “transition” to a man – someone or something more “war-proof”.

The next key event is the surgery Khalil undertakes to have an ulcer removed, where he develops a crush on a doctor, named Waddah Ibrahim, and goes through a surreal out-of-body experience during the surgical procedure, after which he comes round with a renewed

passion for life. During the surgery, Khalil sees his body being operated on and believes he is coming close to death. Dr Waddah Ibrahim, whose name comes from the Arabic root ‘ و ض ح ’ (*Waw Dad Hah*) and is related to the verb ‘ وَضَّحَ ’ (*waddaha*: to clarify), peers over Khalil and produces “warm milk that flows from his face into Khalil’s eye and suddenly whitens the entire place up as it starts snowing outside, behind the window” (Barakat [1990] 1998, 197). The sexual undertones of the surreal scene are not to be missed: a metaphorical insemination of a dose of “reality” directly into Khalil’s eye that somehow clears up his world and shows him the way forward. Later on, Khalil fantasizes about the doctor and envisages him as a hybrid between a handsome man and a mother-figure, “full of love and care, who hugs him with huge breasts, whose milk is more abundant than Khalil’s mother’s” (205–206), implicating his earlier fantastical projections with a touch of incestuous transference. Unlike Khalil’s mother, who mockingly labels her “boy” as a “girl”, the androgynous doctor’s milk conveys a positive message to Khalil that alters his scepticism and reassures him of the value of his body.

Khalil is transformed after his experience; he now embraces his second chance at life and suddenly grows fond of his post-surgery body as he reflects on the whole experience in the cab ride from the hospital: “‘I’m so happy ... I’m so happy’ [...]; ‘I love my beautiful body’” (Barakat [1990] 1998, 201). Upon returning to his room, Khalil addresses himself, “‘Hello oh Khalil. How sorry I am! I hadn’t realized how much I loved you, how much I loved life. He who hates himself does not love life. [...], oh beautiful Khalil’” (203). Khalil’s renewed passion for life marks a turning point. The “new Khalil” in the mirror is positive and assertive – he is the new male Khalil into which the original androgynous protagonist is metamorphosing. In contrast to his previous anxiety in Nayef’s presence, Khalil now enjoys a “manly friendship” with him: the pair spend more time together, chat and go out eating and smoking shisha, seeing eye-to-eye on most things (217): “Khalil is no longer quiet as he used

to be” (218). Moreover, Khalil starts sexualizing his new tenant, a single mother who rents Mme Isabelle’s apartment from him, and “gazes at her legs” (215) as she goes up the stairs past him. On another occasion, Khalil’s hand feels the “top of her small breast” as he helps her carry her sleeping son; the “electric touch” (228) leaves Khalil feeling heady with burgeoning desire. Yet Khalil (or the dwindling queer part of him) seems to identify with the woman: “There is something about this woman that reminds me of myself. Something somewhat manly I can’t put my finger on. And this is what provokes my curiosity towards her” (216). Khalil’s identification with the woman, which appears to have a gender-queer element to it, acquires special symbolic significance that is revealed at the end of the novel.

A close encounter with death during an ambush compels Khalil to accept that the only way forward is for him to “fit in” and start “loving himself”, which, he concludes, will have to come at the expense of “hating others”. Khalil’s androgynous Self ends up leaving him in a surreal dramatic exchange between the protagonist’s two competing alter egos, who agree that Khalil cannot reconcile his idealism with survival: “what choice, what choice, what choice?!” (234). Khalil’s good Self tries hard to stay within him, but he and his Self finally come to the conclusion that: “Let’s conclude with one final useful stance: let’s put it on the table: We both know now that there is no choice: to love your Self is to hate others. Khalil’s Self slammed the door behind it and stood in the doorway of the building, panting.” (236–237) This moment signifies the birth of the new masculine, heterosexual Khalil, which comes at the expense of the departure of the original queer androgyne. The moment is symbolically marked by Khalil’s violent rape of his vulnerable tenant, which takes place shortly afterwards, in the novel’s final chapter.

This chapter opens with a fully transformed Khalil, who is now referred to as “*al-ustaath*” (sir, boss, or gentleman), a title that indicates his newly acquired status and references Al-Ustaath, the patron who took him under his wing at the **Newspaper**; Khalil has

officially become a warlord. Khalil is reassuring the tenant about his storing explosives in the building and goes to her apartment to explain. She lets him in and he proceeds to rape her brutally, striking her face in response to her resistance, subduing her until she is “like a corpse” (Barakat [1990] 1998, 244). As Khalil “zips up his trousers”, he notices lights and drawings in the corner of the room, which indicates that the woman has been playing a traditional game, *Bayt Byoot*, with her child in an attempt to restore a sense of normality in the middle of the War. Khalil smirks and congratulates himself at finally becoming a man and “belonging to his brothers” (245).

Khalil’s radical transformation, which grants him membership of a hetero-patriarchal “manhood”, comes at the expense of purging the special queer hero of the novel. His savage rape of the woman turns him into his very antithesis: a macho, aggressive man committing “the ultimate act of male sexual violence” (Al-Samman 2008, 296). Nonetheless, Khalil’s rape of the woman, with whom he had identified, can also be seen as a metaphorical act of self-rape: a complete purge of the queer in him. Khalil is physically transformed after the assault: he now sports a moustache, a pair of sunglasses and a leather jacket – “often the look of the infamous *Mukhabarat* secret service agents.” (Barakat [1990] 1998, 294–295); even his shoulders are now broad. The shocked narrator follows him as he gets in the car with his bodyguard; she asks where he is going, but he does not see or hear her. She watches in horror as the car drives off, noting how Khalil appeared to be “rising upwards” as the car moved on:

How you’ve changed since I described you in the first pages! You now know more than I do. Alchemy. The stone of laughter.

Khalil is gone. He’s become a man who laughs. And I am still a woman who writes.

Khalil, my darling hero. (Barakat [1990] 1998, 246)

Like the ghosts that roam the city unnoticed, the narrator remains trapped in a limbo, talking to an audience-less vacuum; the androgynous Khalil would have felt her presence, for he himself had once led a spirit-like existence. This laughing man is like the rest now: insensitive and fully immersed in the business of killing. The transformed Khalil may as well be a completely new character, since he bears no resemblance to the original hero of the first Arabic novel with an androgynous, homosexual protagonist, whose eventual demise symbolizes the impossibility of veering away from gender and sexual norms in the postcolonial era.

Both Samira Aghacy and Hanadi al-Samman read the novel's unexpected ending as an assertion of the impossibility to remain neutral. For Aghacy, "The novel demonstrates [...] that the state of androgyny is unattainable and that the gap between the masculine and the feminine is unbridgeable." (1998, 200). Al-Samman, however, links this failure to the patriarchal nature of the War and society in general: "What Barakat clearly demonstrates [...] is the impossibility of espousing a neutral homosexual identity amidst the deep-rooted gendered polarity of violence and eroticised power dialectic" (2008, 296). Nonetheless, Barakat's text remains original in that its portrayal of androgyny and homosexuality -- at least their potential as the bases for a defiant "other" gender and sexual identity -- is relatively objective and uncontaminated with clichéd negative stereotypes that plague the majority of postcolonial literary representations of same-sex desire.⁷

Barakat's sympathetic portrayal of Khalil's sexual otherness is a long way away from the truly permissive attitude of medieval Arabic literature's aesthetic celebration of the homoerotic. Yet it is important to stress her original reinterpretation of the protagonist's sexual and gender difference: Khalil's sanity is intrinsically linked to his queer, androgynous status, the tragic loss of which renders him another insane "laughing man". By shedding light on her protagonist's psycho-sexual turmoil, Barakat draws our attention to the rationality and

legitimacy of his suffering; Khalil remains far more sensitive to the destructiveness of the War than any of the **binary**-defined characters until his regrettable transformation. By presenting Khalil's dilemma as a polemical choice (fit in or die), Barakat succeeds at illustrating the irrationality of the hetero-patriarchal system that is at war with the pacifist queer protagonist and at peace with its own cycle of endless destruction. Nonetheless, the queer hero's tragic downfall at the end suggests the failure of this prototype of a non-normative protagonist in modern Arabic fiction. The greater tragedy, however, is that a character like Khalil would have **had their** dedicated taxonomic and aesthetic position in the pre-modern Arabic literary canon.⁸

Notes on contributor

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Notes

¹ The demise of aesthetic portrayals of homoerotic desire in Arabic literature happened in the wake of the *Nahda* (renaissance/revival) movement in the 19th and early 20th centuries. A bi-product of anti-Ottoman Arab nationalism, the *Nahda* assimilated certain European views on sexuality and resulted in censoring what came to be seen as immoral. See Khaled El-Rouayheb (2005), Joseph Massad (2007), Ibrahim Abu-Lughod ([1963] 2011).

² See al-Samman (2008) and Hannah (2016, 101–103).

³ The quotations from the novel (Barakat [1990] 1998) used in this article are my own translation of the original Arabic. An official English translation by Sophie Bennett was published in 1994.

⁴ The ethno-sectarian conflict was underpinned by brewing political, socio-economic and ideological clashes between the Lebanese Left, which supported the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), and the Lebanese Right (the Christian Phalange Party); the growing Shia population of the country remained relatively impoverished (vis-à-vis the bourgeois Maronite and Sunni elites) and lacked political representation, despite becoming the largest single community in the 1960s (Harris 2012, 232). See Harris (2012, 232–276) for a detailed analysis of the Lebanese Civil War.

⁵ The novels in this series are: *The Stone of Laughter* (1990), *Disciples of Passion* (1993), *The Tiller of Waters* (1998) and *My Master, My Beloved* (2004).

⁶ As noted by Kifah Hanna (2016) all of Barakat's protagonists in this series of novels are men suffering from various sexual and gender-related anxieties (105–107).

⁷ See Hanadi Al-Samman (2008, 277) for an overview of the types of negative clichés associated with homosexuality in modern Arabic fiction.

⁸ This is not to suggest an anachronistic transposition of the contextual setting of the novel, whose particularities remain firmly the product of its era. Desire, on the other hand, transcends time and space; its socio-cultural permissiveness and sanctioning do not, however, always follow suit.